

COMMON GOALS OF ARTISTS AND SCIENTISTS

We talk about the crossovers between science and art with the artist and pedagogue **Prof. Adam Wsiołkowski**.

The career paths of scientists and artists have much in common. Both professions involve travel, meeting new people and constantly expanding one's horizons. How do you see the crossover between science and art?

ADAM WSIOŁKOWSKI: The classic line “there are known unknowns and unknown unknowns” seems apt here. On one hand, there are fundamental differences between science and art, and on the other there are myriad commonalities.

Let's start with the differences. One of the main goals of science is describing the world, the mechanisms which govern it and making discoveries. These mechanisms objectively exist. For example, gravity has always been with us – Isaac Newton simply realized it and gave it a name. Similarly, our universe was heliocentric long before Copernicus; his role was to disseminate this knowledge, but the cosmos existed and continues to exist regardless. Atoms, cells and other fundamental elements of our universe are as they are, whether we're aware of them or not. I am not trying to belittle science, but to explain how it differs from art. Science is a little like lifting the lid from a simmering pot and peeking inside: there's something in there, ready for a hungry scientist to discover.

The arts are also about making discoveries, but first and foremost artists create something which wasn't there before. This new object/value would not exist were it not for this particular artist. This means the value of discovery in art is more personal. That's my intuitive – and far from scientific! – attempt at explaining the difference.



ANNA SZWAJA

Prof. Adam Wsiołkowski

Graduate of the Faculty of Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, where he went on to become a lecturer and later rector (2008–2012). In 1981 and 1982 he spent six months in the United States on a Kościuszko Foundation grant. He has participated in over 200 exhibitions at home and abroad, including over 70 individual exhibitions in Kraków, Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław, Paris, New York, Kyiv and Prague. Two-time winner of awards of the Polish Minister of Culture as well as the Prize of the City of Kraków and the Gloria Artis Gold Medal for Merit to Arts. His works are exhibited at numerous museums in Poland and abroad. In 2017, he published a memoir *Moja Akademia* [My Academy]. He is the faithful human of a dachshund named Felek the Third.

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What about the humanities? Categories such as social status and philosophical trends aren't discovered but rather invented, noted and named.

Yes, I've been thinking about this, too. I see the humanities and social sciences as something of a hybrid since they require creativity – just as art does. Exact sciences are about objective, verifiable knowledge. In turn, fields such as philosophy, history of art and philology are filled with myriad interpretations all of which are valid and all of which can be argued for and against. It's certainly not easy to make a clear distinction.

What's the role of intuition in science and art?

Both fields have their geniuses. Scientific discoveries may be accidental, but their authors require extensive prior knowledge and intuition to notice them or be led to them. Intuition is also required in art, and I will attempt to discuss their analogies.

Scientists and artists strive to find truth: for scientists this is objective truth, while for artists it doesn't have to mean the same thing to everyone.

Intuition is a sense that one's actions are correct. When we feel it, we are convinced of something even though we have no way of explaining why. Creativity, passion, and initiative are common to scientists and artists alike. Both fields require the drive and ability to find one's own way and new solutions. Scientists and artists strive to find truth: for scientists this is objective truth, while for artists it doesn't have to mean the same thing to everyone.

What's the role of science in the arts?

When we teach art, we also teach subjects such as anatomy, perspective and technology, but this understanding doesn't make someone an artist – nor a scientist. From the point of view of real art, all it means is that someone has an understanding or, say, anatomy – that's it. And there are plenty of naïve artists with no formal training producing phenomenal work.

Artistic education conveys scholarly knowledge, but the extent of this knowledge doesn't determine whether one is a good artist. Teaching at university level means we make an assumption that our students have already attained a certain level of education

which we then continue. This common knowledge creates a platform for communication and understanding.

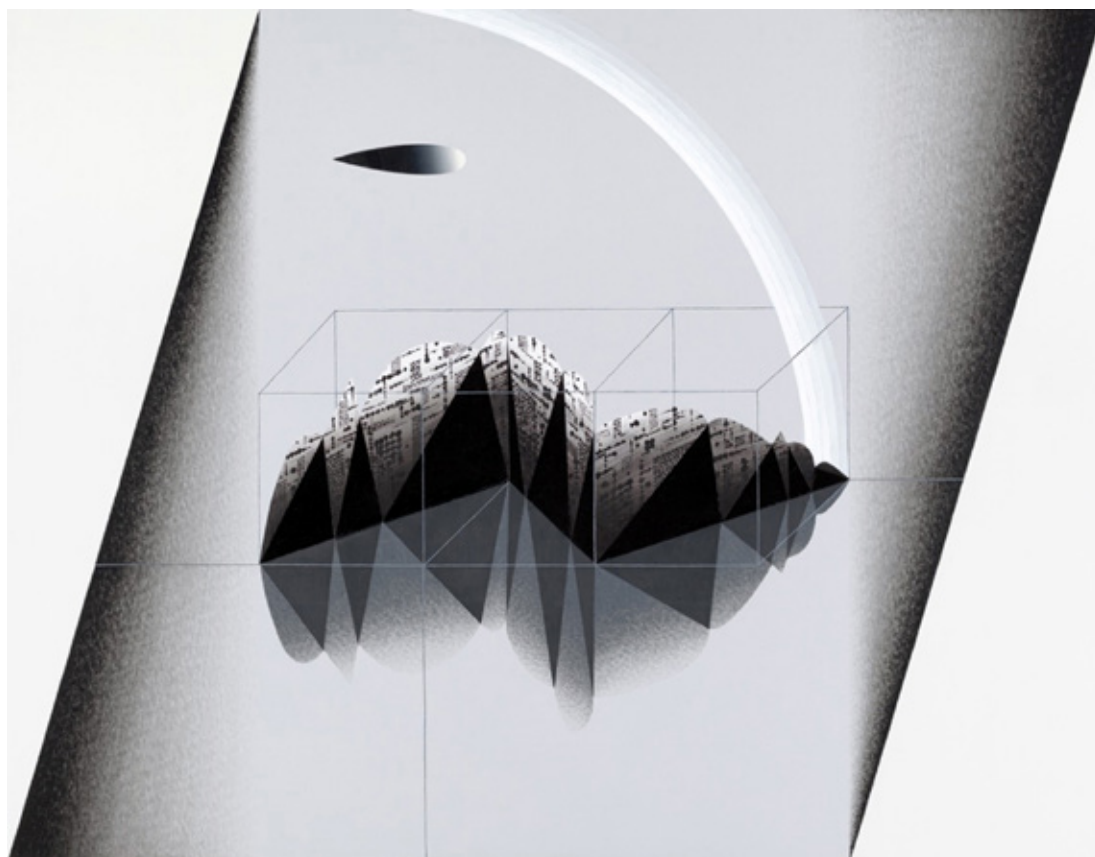
Art is something greater. Let's take two scientists who know the same amount about an artist, epoch, style. Their interpretations can be very different – not in terms of the artist's background or the artwork's title, but in how they analyze and understand it.

Artworks aren't mathematical equations. Science – in particular exact sciences – is about objective truths. We can list the components of atoms, although I should add that this is based on our current knowledge and has evolved over time. It's something that can be demonstrated. In art, instead of hard proof, the objective knowledge is interpretation. Let's take a look at one of the simplest ways of perceiving art: color. We objectively know that red light has the shortest wavelength and violet the longest. Psychologists know that red is a stimulant while blue and green have a calming effect. Yet even the latter is a matter for discussion, since individual responses to color vary. Getting back to our two scientists, they will perceive the artwork differently, and both interpretations are equally valid. Individuals simply perceive artworks the way they do, and respond emotionally in their own ways. Some people will be brought to euphoria while others to despair.

Does the relationship between science and art come up in your teaching?

I've already said that people with little formal knowledge but great depth can be terrific artists. I've been teaching for 46 years, starting as an assistant, with a dozen or so students every year. Many of them disappear from the artistic world – after graduation their lives take a different path. This can happen for myriad reasons, not necessarily through fault of their own. Some burn out even if they were good students. Others may struggle at first and only catch up later. But from all the students I've taught over the years, I could count true gems on the fingers of one hand. It's a fantastic feeling, although I don't take credit for their achievements. I always say that they are the drivers of their own success, and I work with the material I am given. There have been times when students have failed a semester, which I also took to be my failure. It's wonderful to have talented students, but everyone is different.

At the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków I run the drawing and painting studio. A supervisor of a studio chosen by students is something of a godlike figure whose actions are never questioned. This is the highest level of approval – far greater than academic titles. No one interferes with how the supervisor runs their studio – it's entirely their domain. For example, I drive my colleagues mad when I say I haven't got a formal program for how I run my studio. After the first year, some students come to me and choose the studio for



Adam Wsiołkowski
 "The Unknown City V A"
 100×130 cm
 oil, acrylic on canvas,
 2011

MAREK M. GARDULSKI

the remainder of their degree. We start by “sniffing around one another”; I look at what they bring, and they check what I have to offer. I’m a bit like a medic – I ask the student where it hurts and pick the right therapy to cure it. This takes time, especially in the unfamiliar environment of the first year at university.

In my teaching practice I’ve always strived to know as much as I can about my students – their backgrounds, families, health. I take all this into account when helping them develop as artists. I’ve always applied the principle that if a student finished the semester with a mediocre grade, next time they had to go up or down a grade – the option of staying on the same level is out.

But it isn’t just about attaining knowledge, is it?

Of course it’s mainly about helping students develop their artistic awareness, since it’s not the level of education which decides an artist’s status and abilities. As a pedagogue, the more I know about the given student, the better placed I am to support them.

Is it possible to teach someone the art of painting? Great minds declare that this is impossible; that you can teach craftsmanship, technique, but not art itself. Even the greatest master cannot create an artist; it’s impossible. You can teach certain skills, like dexterity.

You can make a great technician, but artists create themselves. If an individual cannot become an artist, no one can do it for them. We are like coaches who talk about sport psychology, suggest exercises, provide encouragement, but cannot win the race or score the points. We stand by the track and cheer on, but it is the student who is competing. This would probably sound rather vague to a scientist.

So an art teacher is something of a coach and therapist?

The formula of the relationship between master and pupil has been tried and tested over the centuries. They don’t have to work together every day, although that’s how my master Waław Taranczewski and I operated. All teachers have their own methods, but the formula of master/pupil remains. I strive to know as much as I can about my students, and they know about me, what I do, how I work. It’s an interpersonal relationship which I suspect isn’t as important in other fields. In science, a close relationship between students and teachers may not be essential. In art and music it is always there, and the bond frequently becomes lifelong.

INTERVIEWED BY JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PhD